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NSC FOR E. MILLARD

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SUBJECT: GSL still a party to the ceasefire with the
Tigers; PM's remarks do not net a positive reaction

Refs: (A) Colombo 26, and previous

(U) Classified by Ambassador Jeffrey J. Lunstead.
Reasons 1.5 (b, d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: In the wake of the PM's January 7 comments calling for the President to take responsibility for the ceasefire agreement with the Tigers, the ceasefire is still in effect and fears that the GSL would withdraw from the agreement have subsided. The ceasefire remains intact, as both sides appear to be observing the agreement as usual. A presidential spokesman said that the President's position of working towards a compromise had not changed following the PM's January 7 remarks. Contacts have told us they see only political machinations, and not solutions, in the Prime Minister's call for the President to take charge of the peace process. The PM's comments on the ceasefire agreement do not seem to have netted him any political gain. END SUMMARY.

2. (C) INSIGHTS FROM PM'S PARTY: In the wake of Prime Minister Wickremesinghe's January 7 comments calling for President Kumaratunga to take responsibility for the ceasefire agreement with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the ceasefire remains in effect and fears that the GSL would withdraw from the agreement have subsided. (Note: The PM's remarks to amend the ceasefire stem from the President's continuing hold of the defense portfolio.) In making such announcements, Navin Dissanayake, a high profile MP in the United National Party (UNP), said the PM was being swayed by a few party hardliners over the majority of MPs who wanted the two leaders to work together. Dissanayake thought that the President had offered some workable solutions to the political impasse -- such as making the PM the "National Security Minister" -- but that the PM was succumbing to pressure from the hardliners which echoed his personal desire to remove the President from the political scene. Dissanayake said he believed, in the end, the President would most likely not return to the PM control of the defense ministry.

3. (C) NO CHANGE IN CEASEFIRE OBSERVANCE: The ceasefire remains intact, as both sides appear to be observing the agreement as usual. Colonel Sumeda Perera, Military Spokesman, told us that there has been no change in the security force operations and the military continues to observe the mandate of the ceasefire. Agnes Bragadottir, Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission spokeswoman, told us there had not been any difference in LTTE activities nor any reports of alleged ceasefire violations. As of yet, the Tigers have not publicly commented on the PM's remarks. Gajen Ponnambalam, a member of the pro-LTTE Tamil National Alliance, expressed his concern to us about the political uncertainty created by the PM's January 7 remarks about the ceasefire. He warned that the Tamil people would have no other option than to seek a separate state if the PM and President can not come together over the ceasefire and move forward with the peace process.

4. (C) PRESIDENT'S OFFICE CALLS TO WORK TOGETHER: In a January 8 conversation with poloff, Harim Peiris, presidential spokesman, said that President Kumaratunga's position had not changed following the PM's call for her to take control of the peace process. Peiris said the President remains committed to going forward with the peace process in a joint manner with the Prime Minister. He added, however, that the president's office was "surprised" by the PM's January 7 remarks, stating there had been no formal Cabinet decision or prior discussion with the President to request an amendment to the ceasefire. Peiris said that the President's attitude was that the ceasefire had continued smoothly for the last two months (since her November 4 takeover of the defense and two other ministries) and there was no need to amend the agreement

at this time.

15. (C) OBSERVERS SEE POLITICAL MOTIVATION: Contacts have told us they see only political machinations, and not solutions, in the Prime Minister's call for the President to take charge of the peace process. Kethesh Loganathan, an analyst at the Center for Policy Alternatives, a local think-tank, told poloff that the PM's charge to the President was clearly a political move to "put the ball in the President's court" regarding the unresolved issue over control of the defense ministry. He did not see the likelihood of the President accepting the total control of the peace process, but was hesitant to dismiss the idea completely. Separately, Azmi Thassim, director of the Chamber of Commerce in the southern coastal town of Hambantota, told poloff that he was unhappy with the PM's January 7 remarks, as the PM needed to work to solve the current political situation, not exacerbate it. The general public, Thassim said, wants peace and that will only come from the President and Prime Minister working together.

16. (C) COMMENT: The PM's comments on the ceasefire agreement were presumably intended to remind the public of the stark political choices before them and to put the President on the defensive, but they do not seem to have netted him any political gain. The President, who returns today (January 8) from the SAARC summit, does not seem to have risen to the PM's bait. She continues to emphasize publicly her willingness to compromise, which seems to strike a sympathetic chord. END COMMENT

17. (U) Minimize considered.

LUNSTEAD